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STUDENT / FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Student and family expectations. We could devote an entire higher education conference to this topic.

When it comes to a discussion of student and family expectations, the “**what’s new**” continues to be the technological savvy of, the sporadic preparation of, and the consumer demeanor of the current generation of traditional students, called *millennials* by Howe & Strauss in their year 2000 book or *NeXters* by Taylor in 2003.

Whatever word of art you prefer, this current generation of traditional students born in the early 80’s began to come of age at the beginning of the second millennium.

Researchers who study these individuals and how they behave as a group say they have two overarching characteristics that make them different than prior generations of college students.

THEY ARE CLOSE TO, AND MORE DEPENDENT ON, THEIR PARENTS!

Some millennials even see their parents as best friends and actually want to live up to parental expectations.

Think back to college students of the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s, perhaps yourselves. Can you imagine that opinion shared by a significant number of students of that generation?

Some, but not all, millennials display an apparent lack of independence, which invites the corresponding phenomenon known as the *helicopter parent*. At its least intrusive manifestation, these hovering, hands-on, helicopter parents remain “involved” in their children’s lives well into young adulthood.

When discussing the most tenacious among helicopter parents, called “Black Hawks,” Taylor refers to parents who think there is nothing inappropriate in writing papers for their children.

The even darker side of this style of parenting is the *snowplow or bulldozer* – parents who push all obstacles out of the way of their children – according to Mark Taylor in a November 2006 article in a publication of the Association of College Unions International.

Technology has facilitated the helicopter parent syndrome.

Gone are the days of two and three decades ago when college students would line up at the one phone on their floor in the dorm for a cursory call home every Sunday to assure their parents they were alive and well.

Studies have shown that college students today, particularly freshmen, “connect” with their parents via cell phone, e-mail, and yes, by IM’ing each other several times a week, and for some, several times a day.

What’s new about what’s new? This frequent communication provides all kinds of opportunities for students to vent to their parents – who had been hands-on with them, relative to their education, from their first day of day care through their high school graduation day.

They complain about some terrible incident such as not being allowed into a class, or the food in the cafeteria leaving much to be desired, or a hard-grading professor who would not reward a minimal amount of effort on a paper or project with the expected “A.”

The parents often agree with their children, after all “who’s paying the bill?”

So, these tandem consumers of higher education launch a two-pronged attack on the staff, faculty, and yes, even the administration of a college about the poor customer service or the unfair treatment the aggrieved student has been subjected to!

This behavior flies in the face of a central goal of college, which is, according to Taylor, moving children, i.e. young adults, from their parents’ worlds into their own worlds.

The college experience should be about empowering students to mature, particularly with respect to the skills they should have begun to acquire in high school, such as critical thinking, problem solving, public speaking, relationship-building, and personal responsibility.

The phenomenon of helicopter parenting leaves little, and sometimes no, room for personal responsibility. And that is not just bad for the student and family, it is bad for the student’s future employers, the community, and society as a whole.

What else is new about what’s new? Beyond this negative perception on the part of some staff and faculty of millennials and their helicopter parents, there are other perceptions where what colleges think is vastly different from what students and their parents think. And there is no more striking example of that than student preparedness for college.

There is a very real disconnect between how well some students perceive their readiness for college level study, and the experience of and feedback we hear from faculty.

In an article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Alvin Sanoff points to growing anecdotal evidence that the communication and interaction between high schools and colleges needs to be enhanced to address this disconnect.

Both parents and students believe they have been well-prepared. After all, look at all the testing that goes on!

Advanced placement courses are a particular area of disagreement. Some college professors suggest that doing well in AP classes gives students a false sense of preparedness because the work is truly not college-level.

In fact, at this point in time, some colleges will not accept advanced placement credits unless the courses were taught at a college or by college faculty.

What else is new?

There are special expectations brought to college campuses by students who have taken a non-sequential path to a college education.

Some students began working full-time first, rather than attending school full-time.

Some started a family at the same time, or shortly before, coming to college.

These students bring special needs, such as child care and, in some cases, the need for family units in residential student housing.

There are students who, for reasons of economic necessity or educational fatigue, begin working right after high school and only return to college when it is clear that their opportunities for advancement have been limited by their lack of a post-secondary education.

Non-traditional students also expect college services to be delivered in a manner that recognizes their daytime job responsibilities. They question why so many college business offices and student support services are only available between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

What's new about what's new? In a consumer-driven culture, it is understandable that they would question a university or college culture that has not kept pace with the changing, more mature faces on campus.

Not every student fits the age 18-22, post-secondary mold of a "typical" college student. We in higher education would do well to remember that.

So, in the area of student and family expectations, **what's new** includes the behavior of millennials and, very often, the helicopter parents who accompany them on campus (at least via cell phone and computer).

Also **what's new** is the increasing number of non-traditional students who come to campus with a greater level of maturity, independence, and the expectation that we will recognize and address their unique needs.

And, there is yet another **what's new about what's new**. There is an emerging, though still subdued, school of thought that questions some of the loftier predictions for millennials set forth by Howe and Strauss.

In the February 2007 issue of *Currents*, a publication of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, Richard A. Hesel and Susan Basally May critique the methodology employed by Howe and Strauss in their article “Dispelling the Millennial Myth.”

It’s an interesting read, particularly given the authors’ contention that any prediction of the millennials being the next “Great Generation,” for reasons of cyclical historical patterns, is unfounded.